

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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Luke 12:49-56 (NRSV)

"I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! [50] I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! [51] Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! [52] From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three;

[53] they will be divided:

father against son
and son against father,
mother against daughter
and daughter against mother,
mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law
and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law."

[54] He also said to the crowds, "When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, 'It is going to rain'; and so it happens. [55] And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, 'There will be scorching heat'; and it happens.

[56] You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?

HEAT WAVE

We've been having a heat wave recently. It's nice to enter the cool, comforting confines of the church and hear a word of grace. God loves us. What a friend we have in Jesus. It's like a cup of cold water in a parched, dry desert.

That's all true, of course, but there's more to be said. The gospel is all about grace, but it's also about judgment.

God loves us so much that he won't leave us alone. Jesus not only gave us a cool word of grace; Jesus also gave us a burning word of judgment. Jesus not only comforted the afflicted; he also afflicted the comfortable!

Today in the middle of August we're going to cut down the air conditioning and turn up the heat. Now that hardly sounds like good news. If you wanted heat you could have just stepped out on your back patio.

Who needs a sermon like this on a day like today? The people who developed the lectionary should be ashamed of themselves for including a text like this on a day like this. Perhaps we should save the heat for another day or maybe we should just ignore it all together.

But, Jesus told his disciples that the heat was necessary. He couldn't wait to turn up the heat! Jesus said, "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!"

What in the world happened to the meek and mild Jesus that we have come to know and love? Apparently, the kingdom that comes is not going to make everyone happy. Indeed, for some the coming of God's kingdom will be an unwelcome change.

BREAK IT

A recent book written by two corporate executives is entitled, "If It Ain't Broke, Break It." Now that's an interesting title. Of course most of us know the old saying, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it."

But, these authors want to challenge the traditional wisdom. They believe that overly conventional thinking often handicaps business leaders. It keeps them from making the changes necessary in order to be ready for the future. According to this book, there are some attitudes and practices that need to be broken.

I think the same is true for the church. We are often quite satisfied with things the way they are. One newly installed pastor was told by an elder in his congregation, "Just preach a good sermon, visit the sick, and don't try to change anything."

But, if this new pastor wants to be faithful to his call, he cannot follow the advice of this elder. Not changing a thing hasn't worked in the church. The old formulas for success are no longer working.

Statistics tell us that there has been a steady erosion of support for the church since the 1960s. The younger generation has gone its own way while the supporters of the church have grown older and older, what some have called the "graying of the local church."

Personally I think that gray and even white hair is very attractive, but we can't be oblivious to these trends in our society. Things are changing, and perhaps God is calling us to change as well. Perhaps all this change is designed to put our "feet to the fire" so that we will be forced to abandon our broken and unreflective ways.

A NEW THING RESISTED

I think that self-satisfaction is the most deadly disease of all when it comes to being a follower of Christ. And I would challenge us to think this morning about what needs to be broken in our lives and our churches.

What needs to die so that something new can be born? Speaking through the prophet Isaiah God said, "Behold I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?"

I think that quite often God's people have been very reluctant to perceive the "new thing" that God is doing among us. If we change in even the smallest way it will be with us kicking and screaming in protest.

As one who has worked with the seemingly intractable structures of the church for many years, the temptation is to say, "Forget about it. Those people will never change. We just need to shake the dust off our feet and move on."

More and more ministers are doing that very thing in frustration. Pastorates are getting shorter and more unsatisfactory for everyone involved. Churches are wondering if there is something "wrong" with them that they can't keep a

minister for very long. This pessimistic atmosphere has caused some to leave the church for good.

LOVING JUDGMENT

But, I think there is still reason to have hope. If you look at the history of God's people you'll see that God has a way of changing even the most stubborn and stiff-necked people. Through the hard experiences of exile, defeat and decline, the people of God learned to trust in God and not in their own understanding.

God, because he loved his people was willing to judge them. And I think that God still loves us enough to judge us as well.

Whenever I talk about the judgment of God I like to use the example of the surgeon's scalpel. The surgeon's scalpel wounds us. Depending upon the severity of the operation, it can take several weeks or even months to recover. But, the surgeon hurts in order to heal. The surgeon cuts away that cancerous growth so that in the end we might be saved.

The same is true with the judgment of God. The Bible tells us that our God is a "consuming fire." In the presence of God the prophets were often acutely aware of their own sinfulness and the sinfulness of their people.

And when the Word became flesh and dwelt among us in the person of Jesus, the same was true. John the Baptist predicted that Jesus would baptize not only with water but with the fire of the Holy Spirit.

The ministry of Jesus was not about affirming the old traditional ways. The ministry of Jesus was about bringing change, God's change. To some that change was like a cup of cool, refreshing water. And to others that change was like a raging wildfire, a fire that threatened everything they held dear.

Why do you think they crucified him? It was because Jesus threatened to burn down the house, the house of sacred tradition.

REBUILDING THE HOUSE

The Bible tells us that unless the Lord builds a house the workers labor in vain. Jesus told the religious leaders of his day that they had been busy building their own house without relying upon the master builder. And in the end that spelled disaster.

When the Son of God came to earth, they did not recognize him. Instead they killed him. That's the "baptism" that Jesus speaks about in verse 50. His fiery message brought down the wrath of the authorities upon his head. They could not stand to hear the truth. They would rather kill Jesus than be baptized with that truth.

Can we stand to hear the truth? Can we still be a disciple of Jesus when he turns up the heat and baptizes us into a new of life? Can we still follow Jesus when the path we follow is the way of the cross? This is not an easy path, but we believe that a home and a life built upon the way of Jesus will stand the test of time. This is a home that has a rock like foundation and a solid structure.

I've been watching a TV show that is made in Canada recently. It's called Holmes on Homes. Mike Holmes is a contractor, and he makes a living and a TV show out of going into homes where crooked and/or incompetent contractors have messed up big time. Some of the homes are literally about to fall down because of the mistakes that were made.

Mike "makes it right" by radically restructuring the home. Quite often a lot of money needs to be spent and a lot of work needs to be done before the home is livable. It is a hard lesson for the homeowner to learn, but it is one that they must accept if their home to ever be safe again.

And then Mike gives the same lecture. If you're going to have work done on your home, you have to have the right contractor. He says, "Check him out. Go look at some work that he has done. Do your homework. Insist on doing it right with the proper permits."

But, Mike Holmes will not run out of TV shows to do. There will always be someone who will be attracted by the lure of low bids and the easy way out. There will always be someone who will trust their house to the crooked contractor. And the results will often be disastrous.

And their will always be people who trust their lives to something other than the grace of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. The results will often be equally disastrous and disappointing.

But, Jesus will not leave us in the mess that we have created. Jesus asks us to invite Him into our homes. Jesus asks us to be baptized by the fire of his presence. He will totally restructure our lives. He will make it right.

FAMILY VALUES

It won't be easy. In fact it will be a struggle. It will cost us dearly. But, the results according to Jesus will be worth it. And, according to our passage for today, one of those costs might be a more difficult relationship with our family.

If you read the advertisements of many churches you would think that promoting family values are every bit as important as promoting Jesus Christ. You can understand why they take that approach. The family is important. The family is in trouble and needs to be nurtured by the church.

But, listen again to Jesus' disturbing words. Listen to what may happen to a family as a result of following him. Instead of bringing peace, the coming of Jesus into a home can bring division and struggle. If there are five members in the home the vote will always be 3 to 2. There will be no agreement. Father will be against son and mother will be against daughter.

What kind of promise is this? I thought Jesus was going to make it right? It sounds like from this passage that he's making it all wrong. How can we promote ourselves as family friendly church when the only promise we have from Jesus is this promise of discord and dissension?

Admittedly I think we all have trouble with this passage. It doesn't say what we would like to hear. But, perhaps it is a truth in this hard word that can help us in the long run.

THE CALL OF JESUS VERSUS THE FAMILY

When you think about the call of Jesus to those first disciples, you'll remember that it always involved a radical choice that could put a strain on the family. For example, remember when Jesus called Simon Peter to follow him. Peter dropped his fishing nets and left his family to follow Jesus.

I want to know the rest of the story, the part that the Bible doesn't tell us. What happened to Simon's family after he left? What changes were necessary? What daily routines had to be changed because they now had one less person to do the work?

Do you think that there may have been some trouble in Simon's family because he decided to follow Jesus that day? I think so.

In Mark's gospel there's even a story that suggests that Jesus had some conflict with his own family because the life he lived was so demanding. Jesus and his disciples were working so hard that they didn't even have time to eat or sleep.

And so Jesus' family said, "Enough is enough. He's obviously taken leave of his senses." Mother Mary and Jesus' brothers came to see Jesus with the express purpose of taking custody of him ... taking him back home and knocking some sense into him I suppose.

But, Jesus didn't allow it to happen. Jesus said that the concept of family needed to be redefined. A family was not defined by those who were physically related. A family was defined by those who were spiritually related. Those who had the courage to follow him and do the will of God were his real family members.

Sometimes commitment to the faith is not a family friendly decision. In many cases, discipleship created division. It created division in our Lord's own family and the families of his disciples.

THE LETTER

And as the Christian church developed this kind of family division continued. A professor at a major university used to open one of his religion classes by reading a letter from a parent to a government official.

In the letter the parent complained that his son, who had received the best education, gone to all the right schools and was headed for a good job as a lawyer had gotten involved with a weird religious sect.

Members of this sect, according to this parent, controlled their son's every move. They told him who to date and who not to date. They had taken all his money.

And so the parent pleads with the government official to do something to help him recover his son. At this point the professor would ask the class, "What group is this letter describing?"

The students would invariably think that it was a cult of some sort. Perhaps he was talking about a radical Muslim group. And then the professor would reveal that his letter was really an updated composite of letters written in the third century by Roman parents who were concerned about their children's involvement in an organization called the Christian church!

LOVING ENOUGH TO CONFRONT

When we dare to really follow Jesus it can still put a strain on our relationships, including our family relationships. There will often be a conflict between what is required of a disciple of Jesus and what our family or friends want us to do.

But, this conflict does not mean that we don't love our family and friends; it doesn't mean that we should have nothing to do with our family and friends. It just means that we love our family and friends enough to disagree with them.

Some people think of peace as an absence of conflict, as everything being calm and serene. If that's how you define peace, then maybe the Christian way is not for you. But, if you define peace as a thirst for righteousness and salvation, if you love others enough to contend with them and struggle with them, then perhaps you could find the courage to follow Jesus.

Some people think that the opposite of love is anger. But, I think that the opposite of love is indifference. I often argue with the people I love and care about. It's not that I want to create discord. It's just that I care about them enough to want the best for them, and they want the best for me.

THE CROSS

Jesus cares enough about us so much that he was willing to fight for us and with us. Jesus loves us so much that he was willing to die on a cross for us. In this most violent of confrontations we see most clearly the sinfulness of the world. We see our own sinfulness.

Humanity is judged by the cross. The cross is not just about what those folks did way back when. The cross is about us and what we do here and now. The cross is flaming reminder of how we reject God's ways.

And yet out of this fiery ordeal there came a Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. When the world should have been judged most harshly, when the division between heaven and earth seemed greatest, God opened a way for the salvation of the whole world. God tore the veil in the holy of holies and made a way where there seemed to be now way.

On the cross the Savior offered words of forgiveness, and after his resurrection the risen Christ appeared to broken and divided disciples with a word of hope and comfort.

THE FIERY SPIRIT

But, those first disciples had a hard time hearing a word of hope even when it came from their risen master. So Jesus turned up the heat even more. He breathed his Spirit upon those broken and divided disciples at Pentecost. And the Bible tells us that his Spirit was like tongues of fire coming down on every disciple.

Disciples who were once cold to the touch became red hot. They burned. They were on fire. They burned with the fire of God's Spirit, and because of that fire they were not afraid to confront anyone with the truth, God's truth.

Don't pray for God's Spirit if you don't want to be burned. Don't pray for God's Spirit if you like things the way they are right now. Don't pray for God's Spirit if you define peace as an absence of conflict.

But, if you love God enough that you are willing to hear the hard personal truth, and if you love family and friends and this world enough to tell them the truth, God's truth, pray. Pray for the power of the Spirit to come into your life.

Pray for a heat wave in the middle of August!

Amen.